



Equity: The Key to Success for at-Risk Teachers and Students

By: Paul Prater

A 2014 report from the Alliance for Excellent Education shows that roughly half a million U.S. teachers move or leave the profession each year.

The teacher turnover – or attrition – rate in the U.S. is approaching 20 percent, up from 9 percent in 2009. Teachers leave the profession for a variety of reasons, including inadequate support, inequity in class assignments, isolated working conditions, poor student discipline, low salaries and a lack of collective teacher influence over schoolwide decisions.

Nationwide, turnover is especially high among new teachers – ranging from 40 percent to 50 percent – where inequity in class assignments occurs most predominantly (Haynes, 2014). According to the Kentucky Center for Education Workforce Statistics, the situation in our state follows the national trend. From the 2013 cohort, only 55.7 percent of Kentucky's new teacher hires were still teaching in the same school in 2015 (Kentucky Department of Education, 2015, p. 23).

What you may not have considered is how the experiences of new teachers, along with formal and informal school and district policies, impact students' access to accomplished teaching.

It seems that not much has changed since I began my education career 25 years ago. I remember when I interviewed for my first teaching job like it was yesterday. Before the days of cell phones, I waited at home because I didn't want to miss the call that would give me the chance to do what I had dreamed of – be a teacher.

When it finally came, I couldn't sleep that night because I was so excited. Like most nights that July month, I wrote down ideas and worked on lessons.

The next day, I arrived at school bright and early. It was still summer break, so when I arrived at school at 7:45 a.m., I was the first person there. I sat at the gate, waiting. Before long, the school secretary arrived. Although she welcomed me, I could sense from her body language that she did not share my enthusiasm for the new school year.

Waiting outside the principal's office, I considered the irony. In all my years in school, I had never been in the principal's office. On my first day on the job, I awaited the principal with an uneasy feeling. When the principal asked if I had any questions, I quickly brought out my notebook and started asking away.

"Can I see my classroom?" I asked eagerly. "I want to get it ready for my students and the first day of school."

"Well, our enrollment is up this year and our building is not big enough to handle all the students, so you will be floating," the principal explained.

"Floating?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"You will be in several classrooms and sharing rooms with teachers. We will get you a cart for your classroom supplies so you can easily move from room to room," the principal explained as

he shuffled through the papers on his desk. “You’ll be teaching three Applied Geometry I classes, two Applied Algebra I classes and one Algebra I class.”

Suddenly, I related to the emotion I had sensed from the school secretary. As I left that day, much of my enthusiasm was replaced with fear, despair and anxiety. Needless to say, my first year of teaching was not the magical year I had envisioned. I did survive, though, and “paid my dues” until I had enough years of experience to pick the classes I wanted to teach and leave the more challenging schedules – and students – to the new teachers.

Sadly, what I experienced 25 years ago as a first-year teacher is still common practice today. Too often, experienced teachers are “rewarded” with the classes of their choice, while teachers with the least experience and training are assigned the most-challenging schedules and most at-risk students. This practice contributes to the unfortunate and unintended consequences of inequitable access to effective teachers and all-time high teacher attrition rates.¹

Disparities in the distribution of skilled teachers placed in high-need high schools have persisted despite provisions to ensure teacher equity in the last reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the No Child Left Behind Act.

(Haynes, 2014)

Many schools across the nation are implementing teacher induction programs and adopting policies to retain teachers and improve teaching and learning. These policies help ensure equity among teachers and give all students access to the highest quality instruction.

While supporting new teachers costs money, schools and districts agree that teacher support is much less costly than attrition and it directly improves teaching and learning. Nestled between the Daniel Boone National Forest and Cave Run Lake, Bath County High School (BCHS) is one of the schools in the Commonwealth that has adopted a class assignment policy based on equity for teachers and students.²

At BCHS, all classes – including advanced, honors and collaboration – are divided equally among staff. This means that a new teacher’s schedule is essentially the same as any other teacher’s schedule. The policy was adopted in 2002, more than a decade before equitable access became a state and federal requirement. During the scheduling process, teacher assignments are based on the equitable distribution of all classes to all teachers, including the newest hires.

: “Our equity policy for assigning teachers to classes has helped to drastically increase teacher retention, decrease new teacher attrition, increase collaboration and improve school culture,” said Melanie Erwin, BCHS principal. “Our equity policy is a critical practice and ensures that all of our students have access to staff strengths to maximize teaching and learning.”³

Lauren Burton, one of the newest teachers at BCHS, said this kind of scheduling practice helps new educators succeed.

"I feel that assigning new teachers the most difficult classes would be setting them up to fail," she said. "New teachers already have many obstacles to overcome and being assigned all of the challenging classes would feel like an insult. It would make the transition into that school much harder and it would create an imbalance or division among teachers. Having a schedule that is fair and just as equitable as any other teacher's schedule makes me feel valued, and I love the comradery among my colleagues." ⁴

Reed Fields, a BCHS veteran, said the school's scheduling policy also helps encourage collaboration.

"We truly have a culture that revolves around teamwork," Fields said. "Our department's common planning days consist of working collaboratively to create effective curriculum units. New teachers have a chance to grow by working hand-in-hand with effective veteran teachers, while creating and teaching the same curriculum.

"I believe I have grown to be an effective teacher. I can't imagine beginning my teaching career in an environment different than our school. I feel confident that I would not have succeeded." ⁵

Fields said more traditional scheduling practices can set new teachers up for failure.

"New teachers are not ready for the most challenging schedule possible," he said. "At best, they would survive. When teachers are in survival mode, students are being done an injustice. New teachers, more so than anyone, should have adequate time to plan, observe master teachers and reflect on their own outcomes in the classroom." ⁶

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, teacher retention is closely related to the first year teaching experience (Haynes, 2014). Without equitable practices and support for new teachers, schools are forced into an ineffective cycle of short term replacement where new teachers become expendable, rather than young professionals meriting sustained investment. Supporting new teachers and having equity in class assignments are critical steps all schools must take to increase teacher retention and ensure that all students have access to quality instruction and highly effective teachers.

Endnotes

1. See [Kentucky's Equitable Access Plan](#)
2. See [Principal Performance Standard](#) 1
3. See [Principal Performance Standards](#) 2, 3, and 4
4. See [Kentucky's Equitable Access Plan](#)
5. See Domain 4, [Kentucky Framework for Teaching](#)
6. See [Kentucky Teacher Leadership Framework](#)

Works Cited

Haynes, Mariana (July 17, 2014). On the path to equity: Improving the effectiveness of beginning teachers. Alliance for Excellent Education.

Kentucky Department of Education (2015). Kentucky's Equitable Access to Effective Educators Plan.